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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. Al-khoei Foundation is submitting the present statement to appeal to the Member States, through the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-fifth session, in order to focus greater attention on issues relating to the education and empowerment of women, in particular Muslim women around the world, and their access to full employment.

2. It is not a hidden fact that, unfortunately, in today's world, religion is used as a pretext for the suppression and undermining of the capabilities of women and girls. For this reason, the Foundation takes it as its duty to preach the true teachings of Islam and its support for women's rights to equality and personal development. Despite acknowledging that both genders deserve the fundamental right to education, more than 100 million children, 60 per cent of whom are female, lack access to primary level education. Just under a billion adults worldwide are illiterate, of whom approximately 70 per cent are female. Equality in access to all levels of education is critical in empowering the female population to take positions of responsibility in the economic, social and political aspects of their societies. Education allows a woman's potential to flourish. The fruits of such progress are improvements in health, nutrition and well-being for women and their families.

3. Issues of women's empowerment and their full and equal participation in public life are human rights issues. Human rights norms and standards guarantee women the human rights to non-discrimination in all aspects of political, economic and social life, and to full and equal participation in decision-making and access to power at all levels. At the same time, realization of the full spectrum of human rights for women depends on women's full and equal participation in decision-making.

4. The Foundation states that in order to attain the aims detailed by the Millennium Development Goals, all discrimination towards women, which impedes their participation in all decision-making processes, must be totally eradicated. The attention and support of government officials towards this goal is essential if this wish is to be realized.

5. Although the ratio of females to males in education, at all levels, has increased, there still remains a gap in the quality of and importance placed on education for females. In this regard, the Foundation has continued its work with women and young girls with the aim of enlightening and educating them through various seminars and workshops, in accordance with the requirements and goals of the Millennium Development Goals. This work is vital, as the Foundation understands that one of the key factors affecting the growth of healthy societies and economies is the availability of high quality, relevant education.

6. The Foundation has realized, through its experience, the importance of involving men in the promotion of women's rights, according to the Islamic perspective. The male support team is administered separately and trains men in understanding the importance of women in the community, the need for their participation in family and community decision-making and for the prevention of discrimination and violence against women, whether it be domestic or public. These men take it as their duty to pass on these values and this different perspective to other men in the community through lectures, one-on-one teaching programmes and

seminars. These participants become agents of change in their communities, thus aiding and hastening the realization of this important change.

7. The Foundation provides high quality, full-time primary and secondary level education to both genders. The Al-Zahra and Al-Sadiq schools in London, the Al-Iman school in New York and the Al-Huda school in Montreal, Canada, focus on the growth, development and education of both genders.

8. The Foundation also runs a part-time school, the Al-Salam school in London, open to both boys and girls, which encourages the education of morals and ethics needed for the healthy growth of young individuals in today's society. The Foundation currently has 350 students attending and hopes to increase its student list.

9. The Foundation is looking to open its university "Al-Kawthar", in Pakistan, to women. The fully functioning university currently caters to men but increasing efforts are being made to increase the facilities to cater to a female population also.

10. The Foundation also has a part-time school in Paris for both genders and continues its hard work in guiding and educating the youth. It continues that work with several youth groups, with the aim of empowering and challenging young Muslim women to think about and strengthen their position and contribution to the community.

11. Our success has come mainly through the following four projects, which have been running for a number of years and are firmly rooted in the Foundation.

12. Bonat Al-Mustaqbal consists of projects initiated and organized by the Foundation's youth group. The projects are specifically geared to promote confidence, capacity-building and leadership skills among youth. A multi-ethnic, multicultural mother and toddler group is currently in its fourth year of operation. Educated speakers are invited to run workshops aimed at building the confidence and increasing the potential of young mothers who in effect are the builders of the next generation of society.

13. The Foundation organizes projects that encourage young girls to take an active part in interfaith debates and workshops by visiting local schools and hosting open discussions for local schools and universities, as well as by inviting neighbours of the mosque and surrounding areas to participate in question-and-answer sessions regarding Islam. This increased level of discussion and open education will help to create greater tolerance for different faiths, and help to better understand them.

14. Capacity-building is the central theme of all the Foundation's projects. These projects rely on the women having a high level of self-confidence about their importance to society.

15. The Foundation strongly believes that self-confidence is expressed through one's ability to socialize and meet new people. For this reason, the Foundation regularly plans trips for young women to encourage them to take these important first steps in their development and growth.

16. Three decades of wars, massacres and sectarian killings have left Iraq with as many as a million widows, according to the Government of Iraq. These widows have no one to look to, and this is not just a problem for one organization or one body to tackle. The situation has spiralled so far out of control that it is important

that all bodies with any authority act in favour of rehabilitating, supporting, educating and empowering these widows and young girls. Only in this way will they be able to grow in confidence and find their place in society. The recent launch of the "Al-Kawthar" project for widows and orphans was a major step in aiding those afflicted by war and destruction. This has drawn attention to the barriers that still remain to the education of girls, including living in poverty or in rural areas or urban slums, belonging to an ethnic minority or living with a disability, along with other cultural obstacles, early marriage and teenage pregnancy. The project makes it possible for the Foundation to help improve the quality of life of orphans and help them to have the chance to live a normal life, to which any child is entitled. The Foundation also helps to empower widows to be able to be independent and support their young children. These life-saving skills give the widows confidence to face the world and their problems. This project encompasses a capacity-building programme for widows and orphans, a school supply kit programme, a microcredit programme to assist widows and a sponsorship scheme.

17. The attention brought to the increase in gender-based and sexually motivated violence, as outlined during the fifty-fourth session of the Commission, encouraged the Foundation to hold a series of self-defence classes for women. A workshop was held with the attendance of police officers from the metropolitan police force, in which they demonstrated several ways for a woman to be more alert and aware of her surroundings and be confident enough to act in the right manner if placed in a life-threatening situation. The success of these workshops saw a call for further seminars to take place with the police force giving the rare opportunity for the women and young people of the community to share ideas and concerns with high-ranking police officials and take part in an interactive discussion after observing real-life scenario role plays.

18. The Foundation strongly believes that with the presence of confident leaders and experienced mentors, younger members of the community will be able to learn and take after such leaders and mentors. The ongoing leadership mentoring programme teaches the mentors the skills they need, including communication and social skills, but also essential office and information technology skills.

19. The young leaders and mentors go on to become voluntary teachers, organizing and running classes for the young members of the community. Due to its success among and the demand from the members of our community, the Foundation will expand the programme and continue to provide guidance, help and skills to those in need.

20. In addition to its academic objectives, the Foundation believes in the physical aspect to growth and development. The Foundation offers a programme that allows young girls to participate in physical activities and sports.

21. It must be stated, in conclusion, that despite the appearance that women are being offered more options and have achieved significant improvements in their status, there are still alarmingly high incidences of abuse of women or of violations of their rights.

22. It is only through modernization, a gradual change in the psychological thinking of society about the equally significant role of women, and, most importantly, educational opportunities, that women worldwide can finally break free from these violations. Affirmative action should be taken to make up for the past

discrimination and to allow qualified women a level playing field in all aspects of life. Women worldwide need to be empowered by being informed of their rights through education in a formal and informal manner, in order to shift away from the traditionally weaker and more submissive gender to that of a more assertive role.

23. Although much has changed, it cannot be denied that there remains a mountain to climb. The remaining injustices should be articulated, examined and tackled by society at large. Women have not been the passive recipients of miraculous changes in laws and human nature. Many generations of women have come together to effect these changes.

24. The Foundation calls for the application of justice in the context of promoting women's rights in Muslim countries and has requested more and better resources for the implementation of women's empowerment initiatives, both at the governmental and at the civil society levels.

25. The Foundation is highly concerned about the lack of awareness about the need for education and training for women, especially in relation to refugees and displaced women and girls in post-conflict areas of the world.

26. The Foundation believes that the establishment of conditions for the educational, economic, social and cultural development of women worldwide will make it possible for them to enjoy their rights and become influential in the societies they live in.